

This is a pre-print of a Book Review published in the
Journal of Contemporary History Vol. 55, No. 2, (April, 2020): 466–468.

The published review can be found at:

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0022009420913498q>

Juliane Fürst and Josie McLellan (eds), *Dropping out of Socialism: The Creation of Alternative Spheres in the Soviet Bloc*, Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2017; vii + 343 pp. £70.00 hbk; ISBN 9781498525145.

Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union during the late-socialist period are commonly understood as stagnant societies. Authoritarian regimes are thought to have offered few opportunities for the expression of non-conformist behaviour and counter-culture. ‘Indeed, until relatively recently,’ Juliane Fürst notes in this volume’s introduction, ‘the idea that “drop-outs” from socialism could exist was rarely entertained in either the popular imagination or in the historical profession’ (p. 11). With the notable exception of political dissidents, little has been written about the marginal individuals, groups and subcultures examined in *Dropping out of Socialism*. The detailed and rigorously researched essays in this collection, however reveal complex, dynamic, and colourful communities operating outside, or parallel to, official ideological, economic and social structures. By foregrounding the ideas, styles, practices and symbols deployed by hippies, punks, yogis, squatters, Islamic students, computer enthusiasts, rock musicians, pacifists, ‘mad’ artists and underground literary intellectuals this volume documents a bewildering array of ways in which people attempted to ‘drop-out’ of socialist normality in the Soviet bloc. By the late 1980s, Eastern European socialism proved fertile ground for the development of all sorts of non-conformist movements, that were arguably more influential and significant than their western equivalents.

Drawing together research on such a variety of subcultures across so many national and political contexts presents serious methodological challenges. The young people examined in Jeff Hayton's chapter on punk rock subculture in the GDR, for example, operated in a different cultural environment and atmosphere to the Siberian punks studied by Evgenyi Kazakov [Ewgeniy Kasakow]. The symbols and styles of Estonian hippies, analysed in Terje Toomistu's chapter, although part of a wider network of alternative youth across the urban Soviet Union, were different to those adopted by members of Leningrad's Yellow Submarine commune, explored by Fürst. Many of these 'drop-out' groups might have balked at the suggestion they were part of a wider non-conformist protest culture. On the surface Romanian yogis and Polish home computing enthusiasts had little common ground. However, the editors have succeeded in giving these diverse groups a much-needed coherence by structuring the volume around a series of clearly defined research questions, which shape each of its eleven chapters. What holds these detailed case studies together is the imperative to question what 'dropping out' of socialism might mean, how it could be achieved, and what distinguished socialist 'drop-outs' from their western counterparts.

In attempting to address these key issues, common patterns emerge. First, the rigidity of Eastern European socialism made 'dropping-out' simultaneously easier, but also riskier. Detaching oneself from western capitalism required active and conscious choices. In socialist society, by contrast, even casual aesthetic affectations distanced individuals and groups from the mainstream. Once marked as outsiders they were easily excluded from employment, housing and educational opportunities. For example, unofficial writers active in the Leningrad underground, as Josphine von Zitzewitz explains, often carved out an existence on the margins of society by working in low-paid unskilled jobs in order to remain true to their literary visions. Police surveillance, arrest, harassment, and incarceration,

frequently in psychiatric institutions, were genuine risks for members of these subcultures. The non-conformist artists discussed by Maria-Alina Asavei co-opted punitive psychiatry and the language of madness as a means of dropping out. Here feigned artistic madness became a method of self-estrangement and self-exclusion. Second, the boundaries between an underground of socialist 'drop-outs' and mainstream society were remarkably fluid. As Madigan Andrea Fichter proposes, 'dropping out of socialism was not necessarily a permanent or an absolute condition' (p. 87). Young Muslims who began to publicly explore their faith did not automatically renounce all aspects of Yugoslav socialism. Furthermore, non-conformist 'drop-outs' were often closely entangled with wider society, not least because many groups defined themselves in active opposition to the established order. In other words, socialism provided the context against which these alternative identities were evaluated. Where normative societies were confronted, as in Jeff Hayton's study of East German punks, it was difficult to divorce oneself from the mainstream, especially when a significant minority of punks were Stasi informers. Although the Polish computer users in Wasiak's chapter developed brand identities based on western computing systems, it was official computer clubs that developed their programming skills. Squatting, as Peter Angus Mitchell reveals, was an illegal and marginal practice in East Germany, but one unofficially condoned by bureaucrats faced with acute housing shortages. The Leningrad and Moscow rock musicians in Anna Kan's study had to regularly 'drop into' socialism to earn cash to fund their bands and support their lifestyle. 'The truth was that while socialism as an ideology was very inimical to drop-out culture, socialist reality was a more ambiguous entity' (p. 14).

Dropping out of Socialism is an impressive piece of scholarship, which draws together rich and insightful research from across the Soviet Bloc and cultural spectrum. It

makes an important contribution to recent re-examinations of late socialism, and the questioning of a notion of late Soviet stagnation. Readers familiar with the social and cultural history of the Soviet bloc will perhaps gain the most from these essays, however anybody with an interest in Eastern European history will learn much from these original and meticulous essays, and their careful framing by the volume's editors.

ROBERT DALE

NEWCASTLE UNIVERSITY